

REVIEW: THE ROAD TO HOME RULE

Angus Calder

Christopher Harvie and Peter Jones (2000), **The Road to Home Rule**,
Edinburgh: Polygon, pb, 218pp, £12.99, ISBN 1-902930-10-X

This is a very pleasant book to look at and handle and a thoroughly 'good read' - I cantered through it more or less 'at a sitting'. Polygon's design provides a lavish format for 100 illustrations, which the eye is caught at once by and returns to irresistibly.

There are paintings, photographs, documents, cartoons. Some are very familiar - Hugh Miller posed by Hill and Adamson dressed as working man when he was in fact a public figure of towering bourgeois status; Lavery's fine portrait of Maxton; Sandy Moffat's 'Poet's Pub', showing eight elder greats and shy young Alan Bold making nine. Others are unexpected and provocative. Willie Ross, Labour Secretary of State, and the Lord Provost of Glasgow, shot close-up from a level just above their knees, stand proudly in 1968 before one of Scotland's new housing tower blocks, which were already proving to be disastrous. In the same year, Robert McIntyre, once, briefly, Scotland's first Nationalist MP, now decked in the robes of Provost of Stirling, hands the freedom of the burgh, in the form of a silver tassie, to 'Mad Mitch' - Lieutenant Colonel Colin Mitchell - in honour of his derring-do against the wogs of Aden in command of the soon-to-be-disbanded Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders. John Bett dressed as George Washington, flanked by Sillars and Salmond, stands in Govan, during the November 1988 by-election, in front of a huge poster: NOBODY EVER CELEBRATED DEVOLUTION DAY. These three come from the **Herald** archive. **The Scotsman's** also provides fine things, as does the admirable Gordon Wright, avidly active as solo photographer of the political and literary scenes (which in recent Scotland have sometimes overlapped completely.)

The text which is garnished with such quirks and beauties takes us in 77 pages from 1707 to the 1960s, when the SNP broke through. Then 128 cover

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the years till almost-now, May 2000, when the new Parliament celebrated its first anniversary. This balance perhaps accounts for early imperfections. Captious scholars will note, in a somewhat breathless rush to get to the moment in 1958 when the Labour Party finally (as it might then have seemed) junked its traditional commitment to home rule, certain dubious summary statements. How, for instance, could 'successive Conservative governments' be held to have thwarted the Evangelical campaign for an end to landed patronage in the Kirk, which at last uttered the Disruption of 1843, when reforming Whigs had been in control in the 1830s? There are also strange omissions. The cardinal factor in Scotland's hearty acceptance of Union was the opportunities provided by Empire, which stimulated lust to go overseas. Those great Wandering North Britons, Livingstone and RLS, not mentioned here, did more, I think, to define Scots' sense of their country's place in the world than such admirable academics as Bryce and James Lorimer, who are strongly present. And by the way it was the latter's son Robert who designed the great National War Memorial in Edinburgh (1927), also not discussed, which expressed, awesomely, a creative outburst of Scottish sense of difference from England in the aftermath of 1914-1918.

But Harvie, the insatiable historian of twentieth century Scotland in general and of national feeling in particular, and Jones, the cogent political journalist who knows where a lot of bodies are buried, are between them very well equipped to present broad currents and decisive moments in the period since Winnie Ewing's astounding by-election victory for the SNP at Hamilton in 1967. Intelligent eighteen-year-olds may find some of their details and in-jokes hard to comprehend, but anyone who has been reading the daily press fairly attentively for the last ten or thirty years will be delighted to be reminded of such matters as George Robertson's days of debacle in 1996, when, as Shadow Secretary, he tried to fix his party's plans for a referendum. 'Labour had gone, in a matter of weeks, from no referendum, to a two-part referendum, to a two-part three-question referendum, to a two-question referendum.'

Very embarrassing for Robertson ... But in just over a year the two-part referendum in fact occurred, and the 'settled will of the Scottish people' expressed itself so decisively that no sane Tory could argue against it. The question dominating this book is why that strong 'will' took so long to emerge.

Scotland, in the days of 'Ossian', Burns and Scott led Europe in the manufacture of symbols of 'nationhood'. But the vast majority of Scots were content to express the vivid sense of difference which these provided within the partnership of the United Kingdom, where one can argue that they meddled much more overweeningly with the English sense of identity than

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the English ever did with theirs. (Thomas Hardy, writing in the *Deepest of Deep England*, encapsulated this in the great novel where the Scottish intruder Farfrae takes over as Mayor of Casterbridge, but one may also, more prosaically, note, as this book does, the creation of the Oxford English Dictionary by the erstwhile Hawick dominie, James Murray.) The sudden upsurge of Scottish national feeling in the 1920s, in the context of which MacDiarmid's notion of 'Renaissance' made more sense than is now apparent to purely literary historians, is easily explained by the Great War. This had exposed at the same time the latent frailty of the British Empire and the Ukian state, and the self-assertive vitality of the Dominions, virtually independent under the Crown, for which John Buchan was such a plausible spokesman. Even such an extremist as MacDiarmid now thought, for a while, of Dominion status for Scotland - such as Ireland, however disingenuously, had achieved. The deflation of that nationalist (small n) upsurge, which went far beyond the ultimately decisive but not then very impressive creation in 1928 of the National Party of Scotland, and involved Tories as well as 'Red Clydesiders' and Liberals, can swiftly be attributed to the catastrophic slump of the early thirties and the simultaneous rise of Nazism abroad. These made radical constitutional adjustment seem a very low priority. But, just because the Scottish Office has been such a boring institution for so long - like permanent cloud cover - we should not underestimate the significance of the arrival of that big building in Edinburgh in the 1930s, a monstrous physical devolution of executive power. The Tory Secretary of State, Walter Elliott, before the war, and the erstwhile Socialist Clydesider Tom Johnston during it, created inside and outside the Office policies and institutions which gave Scots bases for extending their difference from the English. Harvie and Jones write especially well about Johnston, whose achievements in four years as Secretary of State included a pre-emption of the National Health Service.

Now for a mystery ... Like everyone else, our authors fail to explain satisfactorily how the signatures of perhaps 2.5 million Scots could be attached, in 1949-1959, to John MacCormick's Scottish Covenant, with its clear call for a 'Parliament with adequate legislative authority in Scottish affairs' - yet then, by 1955, the Tory Unionists could gain over half the total vote in a General Election, such a result as no party had achieved before or since. Factors explaining the second happening must have been decisive.

Four may be tentatively suggested. Firstly, Tories were not then regarded as automatically opposed to devolution. This did not happen till Thatcher's era. Secondly, World War II had bonded Scots with English as never before. Popular movies showed them fighting and laughing side by side. One photo in this book which does not impress, or even make sense, shows two buxom, smiling lasses standing beside a clean, cheerful, elderly man. The caption

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reads: 'Scots girls appeal against being sent south to work in munition factories, 1943.' Well, it was perhaps not wholly welcome that the demands of English 'war industry' for labour, and the Coalition Government's absolute power to direct anyone to do anything, caused the extraction of women from Scottish villages. But once they got to, say, Coventry, the girls would receive wages out of sight in pre-war Scotland even if they had then been able to find non-domestic work here. They would be very likely to attract English husbands and settle in the South - creating still more direct family bonds across the border.

Thirdly, Labour's Welfare State, combined with post-war full employment, had taken away any grounds for economic grievance on the part of most Scots. Fourthly, the Conservatives benefited from the final collapse of the once-hegemonic Liberal Party, whose former supporters were likely to vote Tory to stop Labour nationalising their toothbrushes. 'A parliament of our own' might have been a pleasant fantasy, but 'facts', as Burns knew, 'are chieftains that winna ding'.

The Old Liberal Party, like the Scottish Tories in the 1990s, was literally dying off with yer grannies. Harvie and Jones are clearly right to suggest that it was social and ideological transformations in the Sixties - including the afflatus of 'Youth Culture' - which suddenly gave the SNP strength. The Lowland Clearances - the destruction of working class communities by rehousing policies which spawned tall, satanic tower blocks and bewildering New Towns - dislocated traditional voting patterns. The SNP broke through briefly in such Lowland Deserts, more enduringly, though, in the North East where the Black, Black Oil introduced a wholly new factor into Scottish life and politics.

Breach made, cultural developments in folk song (rightly emphasised here as an easy short cut to being wholly 'Scottish'), later in theatre, fiction and rock music, gave the national movement ideological substance and credibility. The story of Scotland was successfully recast by sound new historians and fine novelists and its distinctive languages were given new uses and importance. Responding to the small and large N nationalist currents, in the 1970s, some Labourites competed with some Tories to be more-devolutionist-than-thou. Then the Thatcher-Major years of democratic deficit destroyed Scottish Toryism and angered Labour activists into thinking Never Again.

Harvie and Jones are wisely irreverent about these processes. Though they set long extracts from poets great and small as epigraphs at heads of chapters, these are remote from misty-eyed patriotism. 'The thistle like a rocket soared/And cam doon like a stick' (MacDiarmid) is a very apt introduction to

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a chapter which ends with the debacle of the 1979 Referendum. About this, our authors are supremely sagacious. However much the event hurt at the time, it would have been a greater disaster if the botched proposal on offer had been voted in when the context was division within as well as between parties. But the horror of that March night stayed with home rulers, in and out of the parties, the arts and scholarship, who worked steadily for eighteen years towards a wholly positive result in a second referendum.

The last word here may as well be given to the new poet, Mike Dillon, whom Harvie and Jones have spotted in the new broadsheet **Poetry Scotland**. For him the 'Holyrood Parliament' represents:

a score of well-kent faces
among a hundred unknowns,
a thousand-fingered beast
at Scotland's greasy till,
a parcel of rogues we know;
a shower of bastards, no doubt,
but at least, this time, at last,
they're our bastards.

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